

Glossary of Legislative Terms

Act

Legislation approved by the House and Senate in identical form, and signed into law by the President, or approved over the President's veto.

Amendment

Proposal to change the language of a bill or a law (offered in Committee or on the floor of the House or Senate)

Appropriation

Appropriation

Allows for spending from the U.S. Treasury for specified purposes, for example, for the operations of federal agencies.

Appropriations Act

Law providing spending for federal agencies and programs from the U.S. Treasury. The three major types of appropriations acts are regular, supplemental, and continuing.

Continuing Appropriations

Stop-gap measures that fund programs and agencies between the beginning of the fiscal year (October 1) and the date on which the President signs the regular appropriations bill into law. In the absence of Continuing Appropriations, the government would shut down because there would be no authority to spend money without a funding bill in place.

Regular Appropriations

Measures that fund agencies or programs for a full year.

Supplemental Appropriations

Spending that is approved outside the normal annual appropriations process either to pay for unanticipated or extraordinary expenditures (e.g. emergency earthquake relief for California) or to fund activities authorized too late for normal budgetary deadlines. Supplemental appropriations bills are usually considered mid-year, well after the approval of the regular appropriations bills.

Authorization

Authorization

Provision in law that establishes an agency or program and allows for spending for that agency or program. An authorization may be effective for one year, a fixed number of years, or for an indefinite period. An authorization may be for a definite amount of money or for "such sums as may be necessary."

Authorization Act

A law that establishes or continues one or more federal agencies or programs, establishes the terms and conditions under which they operate, allows for spending, and specifies

how funds appropriated are to be used.

Balanced Budget

A budget in which revenues equal spending.

Baseline

Projection of the revenues, spending, and other budget amounts. Baseline projections are used to determine the extent to which proposed legislation, if enacted into law, would change current spending and revenue levels.

Bill

Bill

The main vehicle employed by Members of Congress for introducing their proposal.

"Christmas Tree" Bill

Informal term for a measure that attracts many, often unrelated, floor amendments. The amendments to the measure may provide special benefits to various groups or interests.

"Must Pass" Bill

Informal term for a measure that Congress must enact, such as an annual spending bill to fund operations of the government. Because of their "must pass" quality, these bills often attract unrelated provisions called "riders."

Block Grant

Federal money provided in a fixed sum to states or localities for a specified purpose, usually with broad flexibility in determining how to deliver the services outlined in the block grant.

Budget

Budget Authority

Provision in law, which permits federal funds to be spent and designates the amount of funding to be spent.

Budget Deficit

The amount by which spending exceeds revenues.

Budget Outlays

Spending which is recorded when spending obligations are paid, usually in the form of cash. Outlays during a fiscal year may be for payment of obligations incurred in prior years or in the same year. For example, an appropriations bill may provide \$500 million in budget authority to be spent to build a bridge over a river. The bridge could take three years to complete. In the first year, if only \$100 million is spent, \$100 million is the

budget outlay (even though the budget authority provided is \$500 million).

Budget Resolution

The "Blueprint" for the federal budget that establishes budget priorities for federal spending and taxation. The Budget Resolution does not hold the force of law and does not go to the President for signature.

Committee

A subdivision of the House or Senate that considers legislation. Committees also undertake investigations within their areas of expertise. Most Committees are divided into specialized Subcommittees. Committees and Subcommittees hold hearings and debate legislation. Most amendments to legislation occur at this level.

Conference

Conferees

Senate or House members appointed to serve on Conference Committees, also called "managers". Conferees are usually appointed from the Committee or Committees that reported the legislation and they are expected to try and uphold their Senate or House position on measures when they negotiate with conferees from the other body.

Conference Committee

A temporary, ad hoc panel composed of House and Senate conferees that is formed for the purpose of working out differences in legislation that has passed both chambers.

Conference Report

The compromise product negotiated by the Conference Committee. The Conference Report is submitted to the House and Senate for approval, on a yes or no vote, and cannot be amended.

Deficit

The amount by which expenses exceed revenues.

Discretionary

Discretionary Programs

Spending for programs appropriated by Congress every year.

Discretionary Spending

Funding in the budget for a specified purpose that is subject to annual appropriations. Discretionary Spending represents less than 40% of all federal spending. Head Start and After-School programs are examples of Discretionary Spending.

Discretionary Spending Cap

An overall limit on the dollar amounts permitted under law for expenses in discretionary programs.

Entitlement

Entitlement/Entitlement Programs

Programs that guarantee benefits to eligible beneficiaries (e.g. Social Security, Food Stamps, Medicare, Medicaid, etc.) and are not subject to annual appropriations. Entitlements constitute a binding obligation on the part of the Federal Government, and eligible recipients have legal recourse if the obligation is not fulfilled.

Capped Entitlement

A capped entitlement is a guaranteed level of funding not subject to annual appropriations that is allocated to states or localities for a specified purpose.

Fiscal Year

The fiscal year for the federal government begins on October 1 and ends on September 30, and is designated by the calendar year in which it ends. For example, fiscal year 2000 begins on October 1, 1999 and ends on September 30, 2000.

Filibuster

A time-delaying tactic that is used in the Senate to prevent a vote on a bill or an amendment. Sixty votes are needed to end a filibuster.

Hearing

Committee session - usually open to the public - to take testimony in order to gather information and opinions on proposed legislation, to conduct an investigation, or review the operation of any federal agency or program.

Legislative History

The public record and deliberations on a bill prior to its enactment. Courts and administrative agencies may look to the legislative history for guidance in interpreting legislation and congressional intent. Federal agencies also look at the legislative history for guidance in developing regulations to implement the law.

Mandatory Spending

Funding guaranteed by the budget for a specified purpose that is not subject to annual

Appropriations. Mandatory spending represents over 60% of all federal spending. Social Security, Medicare and Food Stamps, as well as interest payments on the national debt are examples of mandatory spending.

Mark-Up

The process by which congressional committees and subcommittees debate, amend and rewrite proposed legislation. A mark-up is generally a meeting where members go through a proposal line-by-line.

Oversight

A review process to determine if the intent of the law is being carried out.

Pay-As-You-Go (Pay-Go)

A provision of the Budget Enforcement Act of 1990 which requires that any proposal to increase an entitlement or reduce taxes include provisions for financing - either by raising new revenues or cutting existing entitlement programs - in order to remain deficit neutral.

Public Law

A bill or resolution that has passed the House and Senate and been signed into law by the President.

Reconciliation

Reconciliation Bill

A bill containing changes in law recommended by the instructions in a Budget Resolution. If the instructions relate to only one Committee in the House or Senate, that Committee reports the Reconciliation bill. If the instructions relate to more than one committee, the Committees approve legislation to comply with the instructions and forward their actions to the Budget Committee, which then reports an Omnibus Reconciliation bill.

Reconciliation Instruction

A provision in a Budget Resolution directing one or more Committees to report (or submit to the Budget Committee) legislation changing existing law in order to bring spending, revenues, or the debt-limit into conformity with the Budget Resolution. The instructions specify the Committees to which they apply, indicate the appropriate dollar changes to be achieved, and usually provide a deadline by which the legislation is to be reported or submitted.

Reconciliation Process

A process established in the Congressional Budget Act of 1974 by which Congress changes existing laws to conform tax and spending levels to the levels set in a Budget Resolution. Changes recommended by committees pursuant to a reconciliation instruction are included in the Reconciliation bill.

Rescission

The cancellation of spending, which was previously provided by Congress.

Resolution

Concurrent Resolution

A legislative measure, designated "S.Con.Res" or "H.Con.Res" and numbered consecutively upon introduction, used to express general sentiments of the House and Senate. Concurrent resolutions are not submitted to the President and thus do not have the force of law.

Continuing Resolution Legislation

Also known as a "CR", enacted by Congress when the new fiscal year is about to begin or has begun, to permit spending for federal agencies and programs to continue in operation until the regular annual spending bills are signed into law.

Joint Resolution

A legislative measure, designated "S.J. Res" or "H.J. Res" and numbered consecutively upon introduction, which requires the approval of the House and Senate, with one exception, is submitted (just as a bill) to the President for possible signature into law. The one exception is that joint resolutions (and not bills) are used to propose constitutional amendments. These resolutions require a two-thirds affirmative vote in each chamber but are not submitted to the President; they become effective when ratified by three-quarters of the States.

Surplus

The amount by which revenues exceed spending.

Trust Fund

Funding dedicated for a certain purpose, such as Social Security or Transportation funding.

Unfunded Mandates

Any provision in legislation, statute or regulation that imposes a responsibility on a state, locality, or tribal government, for which adequate funding to carry out the responsibility is not appropriated.

Veto

The procedure established under the Constitution by which the President disapproves a bill or joint resolution and thus prevents its enactment into law. A regular veto occurs when the President returns the legislation to Congress. The President usually returns a vetoed bill with a message indicating his reasons for rejecting the measure. The veto can be overridden only by a two-thirds vote in both the Senate and the House.